A Tale of a Genius, "Martin Schuler"

IT is bewildering to find English newspapers that do not often fall in love at first sight having raptures over *Martin Schuler*, a book whose author's name was still to be made. *The Westminster Gazette* went fantee: ". . . that work of the younger generation for which we have been waiting . . . the most remarkable analytical novel ever written by an Englishwoman"—Mrs. Humphry Ward is expected to recover—". . . the first fine novel of the age," no less! "A surprising, disconcerting, intriguing, but certainly convincing work of real imagination," opines the London *Times*. "An astonishing book—calm, simple, straightforward and overwhelming," chimes the *Daily News*, which has read it twice and is ready to read it again at the drop of the hat.

If this babe in the literary woods does not achieve a painless immortality, it won't be for lack of covering up with adjectives!

Martin Schuler is one more novel about a musical genius, but with a refreshing difference. Some time ago all such fiction was like *The First Violin*. Later it was learned in Max Nordau, recently in Freud. Here comes Romer Wilson with a piece of it which is neither sentimental nor quasi-scientific; if anything she had read inspired her, it seems to have been Wagner's letters, and accounts of his private life. She offers no moral reflections, no disquisitions on psychology. Writing a simple, quick march style, she presents her engrossing conception of the nature and development of a superman. It is nine-tenths emotion and every bit imagination—"the imaginative force is extraordinary," as the *Daily News* correctly says, though anything except "calm."

But Romer Wilson's critical faculty is cowering in the corner, out of the way. It is wholly in character for Schuler, ruthless young egoist, full of his projected grand opera, to sneak into the garret of his friend the minor poet and pilfer the libretto from the mattress under the poet's dead body. But why on earth should the libretto be there? The sick man set no great store by it, had no grudge against the composer and no jealousy concerning posthumous fame. That manuscript is in that mattress merely to afford an example of the stick-at-nothing selfishness of genius—and to provide a strong incident. The thing could have been far better managed, with all its values retained.

Similarly, when at last this grand opera, begun in Schuler's salad days, is finished and performed, overpowering everybody with its stupendousness, Schuler, now in his 30s, having burned himself out on the work, dies in his box during the premiere. What in thunder does he die of? Nothing but Romer Wilson's appetite for a powerful romantic ending. It is Eugen's death, desaccharinated and scored for the full orchestra. And if there is anything in the world which Romer Wilson does not suppose she is writing, it is romance.

For courage, for independence, absorption and unflagging inspiration, for general wide winged and full fledged capability, *Martin Schuler* is certainly impressive, rather awesome—even its faults challenge critics to step up and put their fingers on them; and we won't be surprised if it makes a stir and spellbinds a considerable public. But before we send up any floral tributes of superlatives we want to see all this natural power do something else in the bridle of a maturer artistic conscience.

Romer Wilson is remarkable (to appreciate a detail) at indirect and suggestive conveyance of the more remote reactions of her characters. Sometimes her subtlety at it runs to seed. Here is a specimen of it at its best—Steinbach is a deep if doggish young man, particularly attracted to Martin Schuler, and prepared to devote everything to him and his self-fulfilment, even to throwing the fine girl Steinbach is engaged to in Schuler's dangerous path. He has just left Schuler, whom his warm advances have irritated:

"Steinbach stood outside in the rain and looked at the gray front of the house. He looked up at the roof and down to the pavement and across from side to side. It was very hot out in the rain; there had probably been a thunderstorm in the hills. He heard Martin strike one note and then no more . . . He could feel the rain striking the top of his English bowler. He waited five minutes on the pavement, patiently and to an outsider stupidly. He was not stupid; what he waited for he could not tell, but he did not go until he was satisfied. Perhaps his body was waiting for his mind to come out of the house . . . When he got back to his house he was feeling better, though better than what he did not know. If he had considered his thought he might have got some light on the matter. He was thinking, 'I at least am human,' but like most thoughts it went through his mind without holding his attention. As he took off his coat he passed his hand over the wet, heavy material. He suddenly felt in sympathy with his father and sister and all his friends. It seemed to him that Martin could not get wet and would not notice it if he did. 'They are all on my side,' he thought. 'Thank God!'"

And here is another specimen—Schuler has brought the great opera in manuscript, with the long dead poet's libretto, to the clever old Countess von Ardstein, who, like every one else, is his slave:

"'Don't lose the leaves of the written portion; I have a very great sentiment about it.' Martin evidently did not consider the notation of the music as written.

"Countess von Ardstein burst into tears. She had no reason for crying except a sensation of amazement. Martin had never had a very great sentiment about anything before. That, however, was not what caused her to weep, but she remarked it. The room seemed filled with a peculiar kind of smoke, and a soundless vibration hit against her ears, as of one shouting so slowly as to cause no actual noise. She had the same feeling as a distant spectator suffers between the sight of an ax striking upon a tree and the hearing of the sound of the blow. . . . She looked very old suddenly to Martin. . . ."

That does not, as you might suppose, convey that the old lady is unconsciously electrified by the voltage of the aura of greatness set free. What it seems to have been intended for is something simple and natural. But (when you have said Whew!) you find yourself wondering if it genuinely amounts to anything at all. And more than one such doubt arises over every chapter.

MARTIN SCHULER. By Romer Wilson. Henry Holt & Co. $1.50.

"Civilization" and Georges Duhamel

By BENJAMIN DE CASSERES.

WHAT is civilization? Is it material progress? Is it the exfoliation of culture? Is it the winning of spiritual domains? Is it a form of retrogression or a form of progression? In a word, is a civilization the aspiration to Power or the aspiration to Universal Love?

The title leaps at you like a challenge—the title on the front of the book of Georges Duhamel. It is called *Civilization: 1914-1918*. To the book was awarded the Goncourt Prize for the year 1918. Last year *The Flame of France*, by Henri Malherbe, received the Goncourt Prize for 1917. The books are greatly alike in that they depict the heroism, pathos, horrors and glory of the Great War. Both books were written by men who handle the French language with the pen of master word magicians. Both books are terrible indictments of the gods who rule our destinies. Both books have inscribed on an unwritten page that great formula of Anatole France, "Irony and Pity." Both books were written by men who love mankind and who possess that marvellous balance of emotional sensibility with intellectual sensibility that is the birthright of the French people and that makes them the flower of modern civilization, as Greece was the perfect blazonry of pagan culture.

Georges Duhamel, as all those who know French literature can testify, is one of the greatest prose writers of France—that is to say, then, of the world. The French mind, of which Georges Duhamel is a perfect type, thinks clearly, vibrantly, definitively. When a great Frenchman has said a thing it is said for all time. The Wildes, the Shaws, the Chestertons and the Symonses merely work it over. To know all of French literature and art is to know the French soul completely and utterly. This cannot be said of any other people, except the Irish. The French vision and their soul, their culture and their character exist whole and undivided in every poet, painter or writer of the first order that France has produced.

Georges Duhamel is also a doctor. In times of peace, from 8 o'clock till noon, his business is medicine. For the rest of the day he is a writer. For four years he has been on the staff of a surgical automobile, the autoclave. This machine is the most perfect invention in ambulances. It is the greatest workshop yet known on any battlefield. From the interior of this terrible apparatus on wheels has come forth his great book, ironically called *Civilization*. Out of this house of life and death, moving over the slaughter houses of France, he brought his sketches which make the sixteen chapters of the book.

Each chapter is a story in itself. Silhouettes of hell. Cameos of beauty. Etched ironies. Always the right word in the right place—the word that is vascular—to use Emerson's phrase; the word that leaps at you; the word that coins a terrible image; the word that drops like a sun into your mind; the word that haunts you.

There are no long sentences in this literary masterpiece. Duhamel evokes emotion with the crashing short sentence, like Victor Hugo and Edgar Saltus. He never spins out his descriptions with dashes. Passion and color and emotion give a pictorial fluency to his style. He sees exactly; he records exactly—which is the summit of literary artistry.

The opening chapter is called *The Face*. "A great brow, almost graceful in design, an expression at once profound and childlike, a dimpled chin, a proud moustache, a bitter gayety about the mouth—I shall recollect you, face of France, even though it is only for a single second that I saw you, in the flare of a match." "Profound and childlike"—indeed, that is the face of France, the face of Verdun and the face of Domremy.

Here is a picture of a "canvas hall, lighted by electricity," which he visited:

"Ranged side by side on the uneven ground the wounded formed a mosaic of suffering humanity, colored with the tints of war, dirt and blood; smelling with the odors of war, sweat and putrefaction; clamorous with the cries, the lamentations, the death rattle that are the very voice and the music of war. This spectacle froze me with horror. I had known what it is to rise up for the slaughter, to go over the top, to be 'in at the death.' I had to learn another horror, that of the 'tableau,' the swarm of prostrate victims, the sight of this vast hall, with its mass of human larvæ writhing on the floor."

But Dr. Georges Duhamel is always and first Georges Duhamel, the man of the pen. He sees a "story" everywhere. There are dozens of "stories" in this book, humorous, pathetic, horrible, ironical, heartbreaking, told with a few sweeps of the pen in the manner of De Maupassant or Turgeniev. But that pathetic Why? of it all sweeps through these sketches—even those that are humorous—like the roll of a mighty protest from the heart of humanity to the tremendous and shadowy Lord of the Stars. Is the human race forever to measure its steps through space with blood prints? Is history to be forever an abattoir?

His last chapter is entitled *Civilization*. Duhamel says: "I hate the twentieth century as I hate rotten Europe and the whole world on which this wretched Europe is spread out like a great spot of axle grease. I know how ridiculous it is to flash out generalities like that; but, thunder! I don't say these things to every one; and besides you might as well be ridiculous in one way as another! I tell you that I shall go to the mountains and arrange it so that I shall be alone as much as possible. I had thought of going to live among the savages, among the black people; but there aren't even any real black people now. They all ride bicycles and want to be decorated. I shall not go to live with the black people. We have done all we could to lead them astray; I saw that clearly enough at Soissons."

This is the voice of a great optimist—for in the disgust and bitter hate of things as they are lies the promise of their disintegration. Civilization is rotten! exclaims one. Ah, but how did you come to discover that? asks another voice in us—it is because there is something in you that is not and never will be rotten!

In conclusion Georges Duhamel says: "Men are mistaken about goodness and happiness. The most generous souls are mistaken also, for solitude and silence are often denied them. I have taken a good look at the monstrous autoclave on its throne. I tell you, truly, civilization is not in that object [his battlefield hospital on wheels] any more than it is in the shining pincers that the surgeons use. Civilization is not in all that terrible pack of trumpery wares; and if it is not in the heart of man, well! it's nowhere."

But why expect so much of civilization? It is, like art and love, a by-product. The business of man is killing and being killed. I should say our redemption lies in another dimension or nowhere.

CIVILIZATION. By Georges Duhamel. The Century Company. $1.50.

Alexander MacFarlan, author of *Mockery*, is 27, a Glasgow University man and turned to writing when bad health put the law out of court. He says he likes Americans and he has an Irish terrier named Teddy.

Edgar Rice Burroughs has bought a place in the San Fernando Valley, California, which he has named Tarzana and which he will people with plant men. He hopes to do for the human race what Burbank has done for vegetable creation.